Foundation degrees and the knowledge economy

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Gender, Foundation Degrees and the Knowledge-driven Economy

Abstract

This article questions the concept of 'education for employment' which constructs a discourse of individual and societal benefit in a knowledge-driven economy. Recent policy emphasis in the EU promotes the expansion of higher education and short cycle vocational awards such as the intermediate two-year Foundation Degree recently introduced into England and Wales. Studies of vocational education and training (VET) and the knowledge economy have focused largely on the governance of education and on the development and drift of policy. Many VET programmes have also been considered for their classed, raced and gendered take-up and subsequent impact on employment. This article builds on both fields of study to engage with the finer crossed analyses of gender, social class, poverty, race and citizenship.

In its analysis of policy texts the article argues that in spite of a discourse of inclusivity, an expanded higher education system has generated new inequalities, deepening social stratification. Drawing on early analyses of national quantitative data sets it identifies emerging gendered, classed and raced patterns and considers these in relation to

occupationally and hierarchically stratified labour markets both within and without the knowledge economy.

Introduction

In 2001-02 the collaborative agendas of the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) led to the establishment in England of a new short-cycle higher education qualification, the Foundation Degree (FD). The Foundation Degree is a two-year (full-time equivalent) undergraduate degree located within the government's agenda for widening participation within higher education, particularly for those who would not otherwise consider higher education. Much of its curriculum is intended to be employer-led, bringing together both vocational and academic learning and equipping Foundation Degree-graduates with the intermediate technical and professional skills identified as desirable by employers. At the same time Foundation Degrees aim to provide more flexible and accessible ways of studying. They are located within a policy context of widening participation, while discursively placed within that of the knowledge-economy and more specifically within the demand-led skills agenda of local labour markets.

While Foundation Degrees are new, there are nevertheless three continuing issues to consider that were evident in previous vocational provision. First, the Foundation Degree

is the contemporary manifestation of intermediate-level vocational education and training (VET), within the same family as Ordinary and Higher National Diplomas, day and block release in Further Education Colleges (FECs) and various versions of Apprenticeships. Additionally, like other intermediate level VET, much of the provision is based in FECs – either solely or in conjunction with a local higher education institution (HEI). Secondly, the Foundation Degree blurs the boundaries of the concept of the 'degree' and the provision itself blurs the boundaries of further and higher education. Thirdly, VET is closely linked to the labour market which - despite increases in higher education participation and qualification levels - remains, both vertically and horizontally, occupationally gendered, classed and raced (Walby and Olsen, 2002).

In spite of the European Union's (EU) pursuit and subsequent adoption from 1993 of a 'gender mainstreaming' policy and the policy shaping activities and research publications of the Equal Opportunities Commission, within the policies of lifelong learning generally and more specifically within those of Foundation Degrees, there is little consideration of the relationship between gender and the knowledge-economy and even less concern regarding social class, race and ethnicity.

The aim of this article is to develop a gendered analysis of Foundation Degrees. Drawing on previous studies of vocational education and training policies and programmes we identify developing trends in the early take-up of Foundation Degrees and relate these to existing gendered analyses of the UK labour market. In particular we consider whether

the Foundation Degrees appear to continue or change existing VET and occupational gendered/classed patterns.

We first set out something of the context of Foundation Degrees in a global economy within a context of 'employability for life'. We argue that the story of education within a knowledge-driven economy is one of continuing differentiation and that there is little explicit recognition that the ways in which the learner-worker is placed in the knowledge economy are gendered, raced and classed. Despite dominant discourses which to the contrary, both 'education' and 'employment' are subjectively constructed and contested and reproduce classed, raced and gendered divisions of labour. With Foundation Degrees located within widening participation policies and discourse, they appear to represent degrees of difference in a mass higher education system which have possibilities for increasing diversity of opportunities in the knowledge economy for both women and men from traditionally excluded groups. However, we conclude that the evidence to date that Foundation Degrees are altering the distribution of educational capital for employment, is mixed and complex. For example: in those areas where males have traditionally dominated in education and employment, Foundation Degrees may simply be replacing previous qualifications and doing little to open up new routes for women; and in areas of the economy where Foundation Degrees are providing new credentials, although new women students are being drawn into learning, the impact of these qualifications on employment in the knowledge economy needs further empirical investigation.

‘Employability for life’

A belief in ‘education for employment’ provides a national rationale for the continuing public funding of post compulsory education and training and underpins many policy narratives about employability and the knowledge-driven economy. Education and training policies in England, for example, increasingly focus on the premise of the development of a good initial education foundation, lifelong learning and the creation and exploitation of people’s skills and research in order to build the knowledge-driven economy (DTI, 1998). A range of UK and English-specific policy texts argue that global processes of economic restructuring have changed the skill requirements and types of knowledge necessary for economic growth and placed a premium on those with higher level degree or equivalent qualifications. At the level of the individual, these policy texts claim that globalization introduces new risks and uncertainties to which the individual should respond. The forward to the recent Skills White Paper states that one of its key objectives is ‘Replacing the redundant notion of a ‘job for life’ with our new ambition of ‘employability for life’, thus helping people and communities meet the challenge of the global economy’ (DfES, 2005: 1).

Within the context of globalization or internationalised economy, the nation state government is said to be in crisis (Castells, 2000), left primarily with a management role (Hirst and Thompson 1995). Moreover, the nation state increasingly develops policy in conjunction with other nation states and with other levels of governance, for instance, through the European Union. The significance of this concept of multi-level governance

is that it contests any notion of a trajectory of policy from one level to another, but points instead to the complicity of the nation state *within* the other levels, hence the nation state government 'makes' the policy at the European level and then 'receives it' at the national (Hooghe & Marks 2001; Jachtenfuchs 2001). The EU discourses of lifelong learning and the knowledge economy, along with the key texts of the Bologna Declaration (CEC, 1999b) and the Lisbon Strategy (CEC, 2000), provide the discursive context for the development of the Foundation Degree in England.

From within this understanding of multi-level governance related to a globalized or internationalised economy, we can see that one aspect of the government's managing role is the construction of a discourse of individualised lifelong learning. This is one in which individuals take responsibility for their own employability. At the same time, the government creates the means by which these individuals interface with and meet the needs of the labour market by requiring that the state funded educational provision is employer driven and demand led. Located between the learner and the employer is the educational institution, charged with responding to the changing needs of employers and, in the terms of the discourse, securing individuals' personal economic positions, as well as the prosperity of the nation (Brown and Lauder, 2001). In this policy narrative, the state fulfils its social responsibilities by targeting educational funding towards an investment in human capital, but individuals are left with the personal, individualized responsibility for taking up these learning opportunities and bearing any associated risks. For some analysts, this scenario means education increasingly becomes a site for the moral regulation of individuals, where, pathologised and individualised, they are

expected to develop themselves in the interests of global and mobile capital (Crowther, 2004; Martin, 2003).

England's Foundation Degree has not been developed in isolation. Fear of the impact of global competition has been a key driver (Raffe, 2003). Moreover, these national policies are increasingly framed by those at global (OECD 2001) and European levels, most particularly the Bologna Declaration (CEC, 1999b) and the Lisbon Strategy (CEC, 2000). These are both key texts in the European Union's development of the concept of lifelong learning, of the knowledge economy/society and of the European employment strategy to which they are both directly linked. This then is the global economic context that has, in conjunction with the policies of the European Union, fostered the expansion of higher education in the UK over the past decade and more and encouraged the development of new short-cycle higher education qualifications, such as Foundation Degrees (FDs) (Gallacher & Osborne, 2005).

Education and the knowledge-driven economy: a story of continuing differentiation

Significantly in England, while making the government's widening participation in higher education agenda more attainable, the Foundation Degree does carry full degree status. However, it is a short-cycle/intermediate degree aimed at the associate professional and higher technician level (Parry, 2005). Thus while apparently located

within a unitary concept of higher education it is constructed within a discourse of continued differentiation, between levels and types of degree. Doyle (2003) however, regards this differentiation as a strength. He argues that Foundation Degrees have the potential to further democratic as well as economic priorities by involving the further education sector and providing a localised curriculum more appropriate to the learner. As a consequence, he argues that Foundation Degree development may redress the academic drift towards an elitist model, which has been the characteristic of the recent expansion of the UK higher education sector. In contrast, Gibbs (2002) questions this optimistic view of the development of an employer driven higher education qualification, the Foundation Degree, because he questions what evidence there is that employers act in the interests of learners, rather than themselves. For Gibbs (2002) the use of the term 'degree' for these new vocational qualifications stretches the concept beyond its normal usage in order to create an illusionary parity of esteem. Whether the outcome of Foundation Degree development is democratisation of higher education or further differentiation is matter for empirical investigation, however, what is clear from analyses to date is that the knowledge-economy itself is also a term that requires further explication.

Brine's (2006) analysis of key EU documents from 1993 to 2005 shows that although the knowledge economy/society are used in a seemingly interchangeable way they consistently (re)construct two categories of learner: the knowledge economy is used when referring to those who would work in the high tech manufacturing or knowledge intensive sector; the knowledge society is used when referring to 'low skilled' long term unemployed adults or early school leavers. Given that the 'high knowledge' learner is

only ever referred to as a graduate or post-graduate one would assume that the Foundation Degree learner is similarly located in this group; they certainly cannot be defined within the category of 'low knowledge' learner. The early analysis of Foundation Degrees and their learners presented in this paper considers the extent to which this is so and the implications for the understanding their 'employability' when constructing the qualification in this way.

The high- and low- knowledge learners are constructed in direct relationship to the labour market. Walby (2006) has identified two main groupings of the 'knowledge economy': first, the ICT/high technology manufacturing sector where 1.26 per cent of the UK labour force are employed and second, the knowledge intensive industries where 41 per cent of the labour force are employed. Knowledge intensive industries include areas of knowledge reproduction and knowledge creation and cover mainly services and/or the public sector, such as education, health and social work. However, this industry defined classification obscures the occupational and hierarchical differences within it – differences that are gendered, classed and raced. In other words, low-knowledge skilled women and men are located in the low-paid and insecure positions (Brine 1999; Toynbee 2003) through the three interlinked divisions: firstly, the prime industry classifications (high tech manufacturing / knowledge intensive industries); secondly, the occupational classifications within these; and thirdly the everyday acknowledged impact of ICT within occupations located within and without the knowledge industries. The learner and learning in the knowledge economy/society can therefore only be understood through an engagement with the finer crossed analyses of social class, poverty, race and citizenship

(Brine 2006; Jackson 2004a). In addition, questions of 'knowledge' and 'kinds of knowledge' implied in the idea of a knowledge economy remain under-theorised (Jackson 2004b, Morley 2002, Young 2000). Such understandings are central to an examination of the potentiality of vocational routes for widening participation in the workplace and effecting longer term egalitarian outcomes (Jackson, 2003).

Furthermore, despite a rhetoric of lifelong learning which shows a more inclusive system of higher education (Layer, 2005), an expanded mass higher education system has generated new inequalities, deepening social stratification (Reay *et al.*, 2005). Quinn *et al.* (in press), for example, have shown that by going to university young working class men do not necessarily escape classed or gendered norms. And while for women 'HE appears to be an important determinant of [their] employment' compared with men and with women with lower qualifications (Blundell *et al.* 2000: F89), Blundell *et al.*'s analysis of the British birth cohort panel data has shown that there is a large gender gap in the financial returns to higher education and that, importantly for Foundation Degrees, the returns of non-degree HE qualifications are lower than for undergraduate degrees. Smetherham (2006) provides further evidence that the relationship between education credentials and the occupational structure is gendered in her analysis of the outcomes of those with different degree classifications. Her findings support the commonly assumed expectation that those with the highest classifications, first class honours, will have a positional advantage in the labour market over those with 2.2 degrees, but she also identified a significant difference in the outcomes of women and men who obtained firsts.

Similarly, James (2000) identifies the tensions and contradictions in government policies that seek 'in a knowledge economy, a distribution of learning opportunities that fosters the widest pool of capabilities [because it] makes sound economic sense' (p135), yet result in the gap between the knowledge rich and knowledge poor getting increasingly greater (OECD 1997, Moser 1999), as forewarned by the EU White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness, Employment (CEC 1993) and on Education and Training (CEC 1995).

Education and employment: the subjective and contested dimensions

While the policy narrative continues to promote the personal and economic benefits of vocational education and training by emphasising the positional advantage to be gained from the acquisition of technical skills and knowledge, such accounts fail to acknowledge the subjective relationship between learning and identity (Colley *et al.*, 2003) and the contestations and exclusionary practices that operate in over crowded labour markets (Brown *et al.*, 2003). These factors are critical to understanding how individuals' agency mediates with the opportunities and choices available to them in hierarchically ordered circuits of educational provision and labour markets (Ball *et al*., 2000). Historically there is a wealth of literature, primarily from sociology, that has identified the processes of occupational socialization and the role of education and training in reproducing classed, raced and gendered divisions of labour through either 'anticipatory socialization' (Bates *et al.*, 1984) or through active counter culture behaviours (Willis, 1977). More recently, studies of apprenticeship training have confirmed the gendered and classed markets of

choice and decision making in which learners engage (Fuller *et al.*, 2005; Beck *et al.* in press).

A number of explanations for these continuing inequalities have drawn on the concept of learning career, informed by Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field, to capture the relationship between a person's dispositions and their engagement with knowledge and learning opportunities and subsequent learning and employment career patterns (Evans *et al.*. 2003; Webb, 2004). Employing this frame and informed by Marxist-feminism, Colley (2006), in her work on how young women 'learn to labour' in childcare, has identified some continuity of vocational habitus with that outlined by Bates (1990; 1991; 1994) in the early 1990s. There are several issues and questions that arise from this in relation to Foundation Degrees. On the one hand is it the case that the conditions of work and the role of education in preparing people for this work have largely not changed: in other words is the post-Fordist workplace largely mythical? Alternatively, on the other hand, are the educational 'goods' now made available through an expanded system simply being re(de)valued because of credential inflation as individuals compete with each other in taking responsibility for getting jobs and managing their training and careers?

Brown *et al*., (2003: 122) take up this latter question and argue that 'even when people are "employable" they may fail to find suitable jobs because of market congestion caused by the realities of work in a knowledge-driven economy and the positional competition that governments are finding increasingly difficult to control'. Therefore Brown *et al*., (2003) go beyond the subjective dimension arguing that employability is socially

constructed and reflects the different and unequal resources, power and status people bring to the competition for jobs. Their analysis posits positional conflict theory and a Weberian social closure theory to explain how powerful groups use credentials and control access to their 'professions' thereby structuring the competition for jobs and positions in their favour. It is an analysis that dislodges the apparent rationality of government policy premised on a consensus theory of employability and its associated human capital theory, in which technology drives the demand for an increasingly educated workface that leads in turn to knowledge workers becoming the new owners of capital who compete for jobs on the basis of merit. However, in relation to the gendered composition of the occupational structure Brown *et al.,* (2003) focus more on the subjective dimension of gendered socialisation rather than positional conflict theory to explain the way that women and men have come to occupy different positions. It is in the light of these explanations that we ask questions about the role and relationship of Foundation Degrees to changing labour markets and the positioning of such graduates in the knowledge-driven economy. However, our analysis posits a need for a post-structuralist positional conflict theory that more explicitly examines the effect of difference, including for example, gender and race, as well as class.

Foundation Degrees: degrees of difference?

Foundation Degrees have been developed with the intention of meeting several Government objectives such as: widening participation; providing higher education

curricula that can meet skills gaps and local needs of employers or learners; and placing more emphasis on work-based learning and the role of employers in learning (QAA, 2005). In spite of these attempts to focus on the demand side of learning the growth in these degrees has been generated more by the supply side, perhaps, not surprisingly, since as Coffield, (2002) has argued the demand side is notoriously difficult to change. For example, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA, 2005) survey of a sample of 39 Foundation Degree programmes which had been converted from Higher National Diplomas (HNDs) found that 90 percent of the providing further education colleges were motivated to re-badge these qualifications to reverse declining recruitment since the new awards were thought to be more attractive to students because they offered intermediate qualifications to a full honours degree.

There is some evidence that the providers' expectations are being fulfilled. Between September 2002 and March 2005 according to UCAS there was an increase in applications of 160 per cent (HESA unpublished data, 2005). HESA reports that over 21,000 students were enrolled on Foundation Degree programmes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2003-04, of which 64 per cent were first-year enrolments. This represents a 91 per cent increase in total enrolments from the previous year (HESA unpublished data, 2005). At present it is too early to analyse the full the impact of Foundation Degrees for increasing diversity of opportunities in the knowledge economy/society for women and men from traditionally excluded minority ethnic groups and social classes. The first cohorts are only just graduating and late 2006 will see publication of the first national statistical bulletin about the students from these awards.

Nevertheless, the QAA (2005) data suggests that there is little difference between the profiles of students on Foundation Degrees and their predecessors the Higher National Diplomas.

QAA (2005) data shows that overall there is a stronger male bias on the Foundation programmes developed from the Higher National Diplomas. They state that despite the providers' enthusiasm for widening participation 'many programmes continue to attract mainly men aged 18 – 24 with traditional entry qualifications who study full-time' (QAA, 2005: 1). On these programmes 58 per cent of students were male, which is nearly twice the male participation rate of 30 per cent for all FDs (HESA, 2006). In part this reflects the predominance of the full-time route in the sample surveyed by QAA, because in contrast, analysis of the 2004-5 HESA data of FD graduates shows that the part-time foundation degree route is a higher education undergraduate qualification route in which women outnumber men (81 per cent) by the greatest proportion. The students on the part-time route also tend to be older (over 25 years), white and have entered higher education through non-traditional qualifications and predominantly through the accreditation of prior learning. Therefore, analysis of the data on FDs as a whole, including those taken part-time and therefore more likely to be taken in conjunction with employment (paid) or unpaid work, shows that many entrants hold a range of non traditional qualifications and that much greater use has been made of accreditation of prior learning for recognising prior experience and certificated learning for admissions purposes than would be expected among entrants to honours degrees. These data lead the QAA to conclude that while those Foundation Degrees that have converted from HNDs may not be contributing

significantly to widening participation, taken as a whole, the FD programmes and the part-time route in particular are making a real contribution.

But to what occupational sector are these Foundation Degrees aimed? Data from Foundation Degree Forward, (FdF) which is the support and quality enhancement organisation for FDs funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), shows that of the 2763 programmes in place in July 2006 only 18 per cent were in the knowledge economy grouping of ICT/high technology manufacturing and science, while 61 per cent were preparing people for knowledge intensive industries, with the largest groupings being in education (354 programmes) and health and social care (213 programmes). Similarly, HESA (2006) data for graduates from Foundation Degrees in 2004-5 shows that of the 6175 graduates the three largest groupings were found in Education (1390 students), Creative Arts and Design (985 students) and Business and Administrative Studies (960 students). It would seem from these data that while newly developed Foundation Degrees, as opposed to those developed from previous qualifications are attracting new types of students into higher education, their distribution mirrors the divisions in the labour force with the bulk of programmes preparing people for knowledge intensive industries rather than the high tech end of the knowledge economy (Walby, 2006).

Given this focus on the knowledge intensive industries, which we have argued is a sector divided into high and low knowledge jobs that are frequently gendered, classed and raced, the interesting issue is to what extent these data on FDs show them to be providing

degrees of difference for the knowledge economy. More specifically, this early analysis of FD data has found that new types of non traditionally qualified students and women in particular are entering FDs and graduating in curricula related to the knowledge intensive industries, the question arises, to what extent does the learning gained through these qualifications enable women to access the high knowledge jobs in the knowledge intensive industries?

Some conclusions: gender and Foundation Degrees - a questionable route to the knowledge economy

We began with a discussion of the way that learning has been promoted in policy texts as the necessary process that individuals must participate in to acquire the skills and qualifications needed for the knowledge economy. Yet, there is little published research on the effect of this vocational learning or of other forms of lifelong learning (Jenkins, 2006). Overwhelmingly the focus has been on the returns to education of participation in initial education including higher education (see for example, Brown *et al*., 2003; Blundell *et al.*, 2000; Purcell and Elias, 2002). We have noted how this body of work has questioned the assumptions of human capital theory and the consensus theory of employability and identified the need to apply positional conflict theory to understand the returns on education and individual career trajectories.

Moreover, studies that have identified the benefits of participation by adults have focused on the wider benefits of learning and the meaning of participation and learning in the lives of adults (Field, 2000). In these accounts, gender and the effect of lifelong learning has been under-researched. Fenwick, (2004) writing from a Canadian perspective has similarly identified the absence of gender in the policies and discourses promoting lifelong learning for the 'new economy'. Yet, she argues that a close look at learning opportunities reveals persistent gendered inequities in access to and experiences of learning. Similarly, research on gender mainstreaming in the EU, including the UK, highlights structural and institutional factors and resistances in the welfare policies and the operation of markets for labour and goods in maintaining inequalities (Perrons, 2005; Rubery *et al.*, 1999). Therefore, in spite of some growing evidence that lifelong learning and qualifications especially help women return to employment (Jenkins, 2006) what is less clear is whether such learning ameliorates inequalities in the knowledge economy.

Questioning the role of Foundation Degrees for women's access to the knowledge economy is increasingly necessary given, as we have shown, the predominance of women taking these qualifications, especially in those programme areas that relate to knowledge intensive industries and where the programmes are newly developed. We conclude that early analysis of Foundation Degrees in England is suggesting that not only are these degrees discursively situated within a discourse of widening participation, but that the programmes that have been developed from within this discourse, as opposed to those that have been developed from previous Higher National Diploma awards, are more likely to be located in a widening participation practice, such as the operation of

accreditation of prior learning and the recruitment of those without traditional higher education entry qualifications. Nevertheless, the question that remains to be investigated is how such practices relate to the learning cultures and identities that learners develop and the ways in which these positional 'goods' are employed in the competition for jobs. In other words, if as we have noted, more women, who otherwise would not have had access to a higher education qualification, are being drawn into Foundation Degrees, particularly in the knowledge intensive industries, what form are these degrees of difference providing? These are questions that require further empirical investigation that is beyond the scope of this article. Our conclusion is that such empirical analyses would need to be informed by post-structuralist positional conflict theory in order to engage with the finer crossed analyses of gender, social class, poverty, race and citizenship.

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